

ANDREA O'REILLY WITH CASEY O'REILLY-CONLIN

## In Search of the Goddess

### Creating a Feminist Motherline for Mother-Daughter Connection and Empowerment

*The term “motherline,” as Sharon Abby explains, “is a term that was first used by Jungian psychologist Naomi Lowinsky to describe the process of reclaiming aspects of the feminine self that have become lost, forgotten or repressed” (844). Current literature on motherlines conveys and confirms the potential of the motherline to empower women to achieve a reclaimed and renewed feminine identity. However, what is not specifically examined in the literature on motherlines is how a woman may reclaim aspects of the feminine self when she is disconnected from her familial and ancestral motherline. Drawing upon the insights of African American and feminist writings on the motherline, this article explores how women may resurrect a lost motherline through a psychic and embodied remembering of, and reconnection to, their ancestral lineage. The article begins with a discussion of the motherline as theorized in womanist and feminist literature, and then visits my own struggle to create a motherline for me and my daughters from a place of psychic and familial dislocation. The article concludes with narrative reflections written by me and my youngest daughter, Casey, about our 2015 journey to Ireland that explores how, in our search for the Goddesses of our Celtic lineage, we created a motherline for connection and empowerment.*

The term “motherline,” as Sharon Abby explains, “is a term that was first used by Jungian psychologist Naomi Lowinsky to describe the process of reclaiming aspects of the feminine self that have become lost, forgotten or repressed” (844). In her article “Empowering Mothers and Daughters through Matroreform and Feminist Motherlines” from this issue of *JMI*, Fiona Joy Green explores how “feminist motherlines afford mothers the opportunity to record, explore, and pass on their life-cycle perspectives of feminist mothering to their children and

to others” (10). Green emphasizes that mothers and children “by participating in feminist motherlines often develop a life-cycle perspective and a worldview of interconnectivity with each other, with others, and with the world that offer them opportunities and ways to create feminist mothering perspectives and practices countering those prescribed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood” (10). Current literature on motherlines—most notably from African American womanist theory as well as Anglo American feminist theory—conveys and confirms the potential of the motherline to empower women to achieve a reclaimed and renewed feminine identity. However, what is not specifically examined in the literature on motherlines is how a woman may reclaim aspects of the feminine self when she is disconnected from her familial and ancestral motherline. Drawing upon the insights of African American and feminist writings on the motherline, this article explores how women may resurrect a lost motherline through a psychic and embodied remembering of, and reconnection to, their ancestral lineage. The article begins with a discussion of the motherline as theorized in womanist and feminist literature, and then visits my own struggle to create a motherline for myself and my daughters from a place of psychic and familial dislocation. The article concludes with narrative reflections written by me and my youngest daughter, Casey, about our 2015 journey to Ireland that explores how, in our search for the Goddesses of our Celtic lineage, we created a motherline for connection and empowerment.

### **Motherlines in African American Culture**

In African American society, the motherline represents the ancestral memory of African American culture. Black mothers pass on the teachings of the motherline to each successive generation through the maternal function of cultural bearing. Various African American writers argue the very survival of African American people depends upon the preservation of Black culture and history. If Black children are to survive they must know the stories, legends, and myths of their ancestors. In African American culture, women are the keepers of the tradition: they are the culture bearers who mentor and model the African American values essential for the empowerment of Black children and culture. “Black women,” as Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos explain, “carry the voice of the mother—they are the progenitors, the assurance of the line ... as carriers of the voice [Black women] carry wisdom—mother wit. They teach the children to survive and remember” (123). Black mothers, as Wanda Thomas Bernard and Candace Bernard conclude, “pass on the torch to their daughters, who are expected to become the next generation of mothers, grandmothers, or othermothers, to guard future generations” (47). Alice Walker’s classic essay *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden* is likewise a tribute to

her African American foremothers who, in Walker's words, "handed on the creative spark, the seed of the power they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read" (201-2). Speaking of her own mother, Alice Walker writes: "so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories" (203). As Sylvia Hamilton remarks in her documentary *Black Mother, Black Daughter*, "I am able to stand here because of all those women who have stood here before me."

The importance of motherlines and cultural bearing is a central theme in the writings of African American Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison (O'Reilly). Motherhood, in Morrison's view, is fundamentally a profound act of resistance—essential and integral to Black women's fight against racism and sexism and their ability to achieve wellbeing for themselves and their culture. The power of motherhood and the empowerment of mothering, for Morrison, make possible the better world mothers seek for themselves and their children. More specifically and similar to Sara Ruddick's writings on maternal thinking and practice, Morrison is attentive to the task of training children so that they are acceptable to their social group. However, with Morrison the aim of training is amplified to include the African American custom of cultural bearing—raising children in accordance with the values, beliefs, and customs of the African American motherline. For Morrison, training or more specifically cultural bearing means socializing the child in the values of their motherline, so they develop self-esteem as a Black person that will empower them to survive and challenge the racism of the dominant culture. Through cultural bearing mothers pass on and transmit what Morrison calls the ancestral memory of the African American motherline to sustain and empower children for today's world.

### Feminist Motherlines

In *Stories from the Motherline: Reclaiming the Mother-Daughter Bond, Finding Our Souls*, Naomi Lowinsky explores "a worldview that is as old as humankind, a wisdom we have forgotten that we know: the ancient lore of women—the Motherline." She goes on to elaborate:

Whenever women gather in circles or in pairs, in olden times around the village well, or at the quilting bee, in modern times in support groups, over lunch, or at the children's party, they tell one another stories from the Motherline. These are stories of female experience: physical, psychological, and historical. They are stories about the dramatic changes of a woman's body: developing breasts and pubic hair, bleeding, being sexual, giving birth, suckling, menopause, and of

growing old. They are stories of the life cycles that link generations of women: Mothers who are also daughters, daughters who have become mothers; grandmothers who also remain granddaughters. (1-2)

However, Lowinsky argues that most women “are cut off from their motherline and [have] paid a terrible price for cutting [them]selves off from [their] feminine roots” (31). By disconnecting themselves from their motherline, these daughters have lost the authenticity and authority of their womanhood. Women may reclaim that authority and authenticity by reconnecting to the motherline. When a woman today comes to understand her life story as a story from the motherline, she gains female authority in a number of ways:

First, her Motherline grounds her in her feminine nature as she struggles with the many options now open to women. Second, she reclaims carnal knowledge of her own body, its blood mysteries and their power. Third, as she makes the journey back to her female roots, she will encounter ancestors who struggled with similar difficulties in different historical times. This provides her with a life-cycle perspective that softens her immediate situation.... Fourth, she uncovers her connection to the archetypal mother and to the wisdom of the ancient worldview, which holds that body and soul are open and all life is interconnected. And, finally, she reclaims her female perspective, from which to consider how men are similar and how they are different. (Lowinsky 13)

The motherline, as Green emphasizes in her article in this volume, “helps mothers gain authority in various ways through exposure to an embodied knowledge of mothering that journeys back through encounters with ancestor women who have had experience with mothering” (10).

Virginia Woolf writes the following in *A Room of One's Own*: “we think back through our mothers if we are women” (72). Indeed, writing about Lowinsky’s motherline in her book *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss*, Hope Edelman emphasizes that “motherline stories ground a ... daughter in a gender, a family, and a feminine history [and] they transform the experience of her female ancestors into maps she can refer to for warning or encouragement” (201). Motherless daughters long to know and to be connected to what Lowinsky calls “the deep feminine,” which Edelman describes as “that subtle unconscious source of feminine authority and power we mistakenly believe is expressed in scarf knots and thank-you notes but instead originates from a more abstract gendered core” (179). “Without knowledge of her own experiences, and the relationship to her mother’s,” Edelman continues, “a daughter is snipped

from the female cord that connects the generations of women in her family, the feminine line of descent ... the motherline" (200). Adrienne Rich writes in *Of Woman Born*, "The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (237). In Edelman's work, this loss refers to the daughter losing her mother through death, abandonment, or neglect. In these instances, separation occurs as a result of the mother's leaving the daughter. More frequently, in patriarchal culture, it is daughters who disconnect from their motherline.

Green, in her qualitative study on feminist mothers, likewise emphasizes the importance of cultural bearing and motherlines for the empowerment of feminist mothers and their children. Through interviewing, these women emphasized "the importance of feminist motherlines to carry the voices, wisdom and wit of feminist mothers" (Green, "Developing a Feminist Motherline" 8). A feminist motherline, she writes, "assists mothers in re/claiming their feminist mothering authority and grounds them in their knowledge and the knowledge of other feminist mothers. It also strengthens, and provides for some, a foundation for the ongoing political activism of feminist mothers" (8). Green further elaborates:

A feminist motherline provides the space and place for feminist mothers to record and pass on their own life-cycle perspective of feminist mothering and to connect with those of other feminist mothers. Additionally a motherline ensures that feminist mothers have connection with a worldview that is centred and draws upon feminist's crucial gender based analysis of the world—including parenting. It also promises a legacy of feminist mothering and motherwork for others. (18)

Building upon my reading of cultural bearing in Toni Morrison, as discussed above, Green argues that mothers in sharing their stories of feminist mothering are also cultural bearers of feminism. "Through developing a feminist motherline, with feminist mothers being the cultural bearers of feminism in their daily lives," Green concludes that "empowerment for mothers and children are sure to follow" (20).

### **Mothering from My Motherline**

In the mothering of my three children, I seek to perform and practise cultural bearing from a feminist motherline. Indeed, I would be a wealthy woman if I had dollar for every time my daughters said "Where do you think we get it from?" My daughters, often to my surprise, understand their spirited and often

risky resistance to patriarchy in terms of a feminist lineage of foremothers. Through my mothering, I seek to connect my daughters to their feminist motherline and impart to them the lessons of their foremothers in order to instill in them, I hope, pride in their feminist heritage and lineage. Similar to womanist theory, I believe that if my daughters are to survive in a patriarchal world, they must know the stories, legends, and myths of their foremothers. With Lowinsky, I long to share with my daughters “stories of the life cycles that link generations of women” and bequeath to them “carnal knowledge of the [female] body, its blood mysteries and their power” (13). However, because of my own complicated and troubled family history, I have become disconnected from my motherline. My paternal grandmother passed away when I was a teenager, and my maternal grandmother, with whom I was close as a teenager and young woman, passed away in my late twenties before I was able to truly learn from her ancestral wisdom. My mother, for reasons that I only partially understand, was never close to her sisters or brothers, and I have met my extended family on my mother’s side only a few times and know very little about their lives or their family history. On my father’s side, there is a large extended family with seven cousins and many aunts and uncles with whom, as a child, I enjoyed a close relationship with. However, when I was eighteen years old, my father’s suicide put an abrupt end to these relationships, and all connections to my paternal family were severed. As a Catholic family, they could not cope with the death of my father by suicide. I have only seen my paternal aunt and uncle three times in the thirty-nine years since my father’s suicide, and I have only recently reconnected with some of my cousins as adults. Estranged from my extended family, I could not position myself in a familial motherline nor could I perform cultural bearing for my children. However, as a feminist scholar, I knew that motherlines are crucial for feminine authority and power for both me and my two daughters, so I sought to create my own motherline from the herstory of our Goddess heritage.

In 1983 as an undergraduate student, I had the good fortune to take a course on the Goddess with Professor Johanna H. Stuckey, and ever since then, I have been enraptured by the Goddess’s herstory and empowered by her presence. I have read widely in Goddess studies, my home is adorned with countless Goddess statues and prints, and I have travelled to Crete, Cyprus, and Turkey on a quest for her history and knowledge. The knowledge of women’s power—held for thousands of years in Goddess societies before the rise of patriarchy—imparts to me the magnificence of the feminine and empowers me to reclaim the authenticity and authority of my womanhood. Discovering and nurturing one’s motherline is not simple: “it’s an idiosyncratic and often chaotic process that takes a lifetime” (Abbey 845). Bereft of a familial motherline, I sought to create one—not from a lineage of ancestors but from the ancient lore of



my Goddess heritage. And similar to the teachings on the African American motherline, I sought to pass on and transmit to my daughters, through the practice of cultural bearing, the ancestral memory of Goddess culture so that they too may be empowered as women.

### **In Search of Our Celtic Motherline: A Mother and Daughter Goddess Journey in Ireland**

In her introduction to *The Serpent and the Goddess: Women, Religion and Power in Celtic Ireland*, Mary Condren writes the following: "I hope this [the book] will empower other women to explore [their herstory], uncovering the past for the sake of their future" (xviii). I bought Condren's book on my second visit to Ireland in 2005, and its worn and torn pages are a testimony to the many times it has been read and reread by me and my youngest daughter Casey; our comments and underlines in the text converge to form a coded subtext of revelation and connection. In June 2015, I was invited to Ireland for a keynote address, and Casey accompanied me on the trip. (My eldest daughter unfortunately could not join us due to her own conference travel.) In planning our two week visit to Ireland, Condren's book became our inspiration and guide. Although I had visited Ireland three times before my daughter's and my planned trip, I did not have the opportunity then to discover the Goddesses of Ireland other than to feel Her presence on the burren of County Clare. For this trip, I was determined to meet the Goddesses of my ancestral land and to visit her sacred sites so to connect myself and my daughter to our Celtic motherline. However, not willing to drive in Ireland for this trip (after a hellish experience of this on an early holiday with my partner) and unsure of what to see and how to see it, I turned to the Internet for possible guided tours. And even though I found a few escorted Goddess tours, none were offered for our dates, and I was left with only coach tours and their predictable and touristy itinerary; moreover, the tours were longer than our available five days and at a cost that far exceeded my budget. The evening I resigned myself to booking the four day Paddywagon tour of Ireland (yes the name says it all), I came across a website offering Goddess tours by Bee Smith. I truly do not know how I found the site as Googling her name and/or Goddess tours as I wrote this paper yielded her blog but no specific reference to Goddess tours. After much email exchange, Bee created for us the Goddess pilgrimage of a lifetime. In the next section of the article, Casey and I share a few of the many highlights of our mother-daughter quest for the Goddess in Ireland as we came to find revelation and empowerment in our Celtic motherline through connection to the archetypal mother and to the wisdom of the ancient worldview.

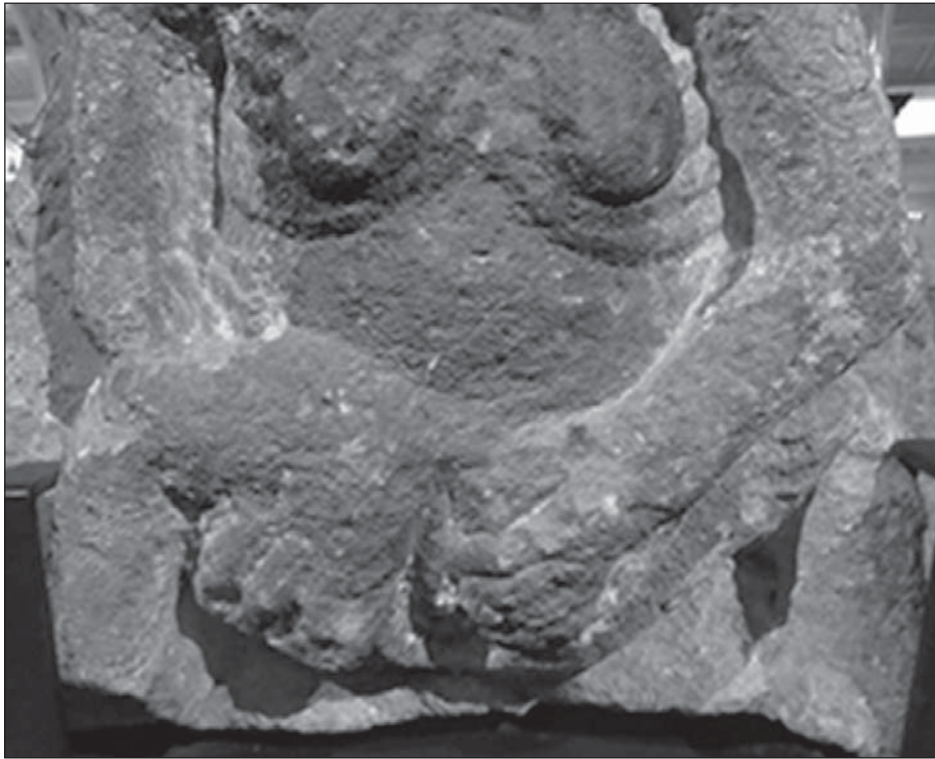
### Andrea's Reflections

In her superb book *Sheela na gig: The Dark Goddess of Sacred Power*, Starr Goode writes the following: "Nothing represents the necessity of reimagining the female in Western culture more than the startling Sheela na gig. The power of her image signifies a wholeness that can never be completely understood" (2) The image of a Sheela, Goode continues, "is astonishing to behold. The Sheela has been called 'whore,' 'hag,' 'witch,' 'evil-eye stone,' 'devil,' 'healer,' and 'Goddess.' She embraces a conundrum of opposites: She clearly offers up her ripe sex, yet she emanates a repelling menace from the upper half of her body" (4). However, as Goode explains, "No written records remain to unravel the mysteries of the Sheelas.... All interpretation is speculation.... However, one can say with certainty that her image survives, and the fascination with the mysterious Sheela na gigs has only continued to grow" (14).



I do not remember when or how I came to know about the mysterious Sheelas but I have been captivated by her enigmatic power for many years. On my trip to Ireland with my partner in 2005, my partner surprised me with a gift of a poster of the Sheelas of Ireland and Britain. In a small store in rural Ireland, the poster was on display, but we were told it was not for sale. A few minutes later, as I awaited my partner in the car, he arrived with poster in hand having convinced the shop keeper to sell it to him. The poster, having adorned many a wall in my home, now resides in my recently built Goddess bathroom sanctuary. For this trip, I read several books on the Sheelas and was determined to see as many as possible on our pilgrimage. However, only





a few are exhibited at museums, and the remaining are scattered across the country and often in inaccessible locations. When I told Bee of my interest in Sheelas, she told me, via email, that many Sheelas are warehoused in the basement of the National Museum in Dublin and that I would be able to see them if I emailed a certain person explaining I was a professor visiting from Canada. Well the email was sent, and the time of our visit was confirmed. The visit was arranged for our first full day in Dublin, and Casey and I, beyond excited, arrived at the museum hours before our scheduled visit. We decided to explore the museum while we waited for our scheduled appointment. We somehow got lost on the second floor of the museum, and as we turned a corner to find our way back, what did we encounter completely unplanned and unexpected: the only Sheela on display at the museum. I am sure our ecstatic cries of delight and our frantic attempt to find someone to take a photo of us with the Sheela were unusual occurrences at the stately and sombre National Museum of Ireland on that June afternoon.

A half an hour later, we met the museum archeologist. She led us down several flights of stairs, through a security clearance, and then through room after room in the basement of the museum. As Casey and I gasped at one historical item after another, she cheerfully asked us about our visit and chatted about the unusual sunny weather in Ireland that week. At the very back of what seemed like an endless labyrinth of priceless artifacts, we

arrived at what she affectionately called the Sheela room. And there they were lying ramshackle on the floor and haphazardly stored on shelves. She said we could touch them and we could take as many photos as we would like. A few minutes later, she explained that she had to take a personal call in another room, and we could stay as long as we liked. So there were Casey and I completely unsupervised in the basement of the National Museum among dozens of centuries-old Sheelas.





Words could never capture what we experienced and shared just the two of us among and with the Sheelas in that basement (so these pictures will have to suffice); their power was palatable, and their presence stays with us until this day. I learned later that our long and unsupervised visit was certainly an





anomaly; with other visitors, their time was very limited and fully supervised. Perhaps the woman sensed our respect for the Sheelas and our affinity with them, or perhaps the Sheela herself made it happen. Either way, I am forever thankful for this precious blessing from our ancestral motherline.

The next day we visited herstoric New Grange; a five-thousand-year-old temple in the Boyne Valley—a place of astrological, spiritual, religious, and ceremonial importance. New Grange is famous for the passage chamber aligning with the rising sun at the winter solstice. We then

visited the Hill of Tara where we saw our first Sheela in her original location. Goode explains the significance of Tara Sheela: “[It] is carved on a standing stone. This rare Sheela is located in a church graveyard on the famed Hill of Tara an archaeological complex where the Irish high kings where crowned. She is half-standing, half dancing, with one arm straight, while the other arm makes the typical Sheela gesture toward her sex” (67) Look closely at the picture below, and you can see her left eye, just next to my ring finger. She is on a stone that kings would have passed through at the Hill of Tara before mating with Goddess Maeve to guarantee their kingship.

The next Sheela we met was in the town Boyle in County Roscommon; she is partially hidden above one of the central Romanesque arches in the Cistercian Abbey founded in the twelve century. Little has been written on this Sheela. I did find, through a Google search, a comment on Trip Advisor describing the abbey as “home to some of the oldest graffiti I have ever seen!” The comment, I suspect, refers to the Sheela because during our visit to the abbey we overheard a tour guide gleefully describe to a group of tourists, as they giggled in embarrassment, that the Sheela was an example of early pornography. Several months after our return home, we learned that the town of Boyle, where we visited the Sheela, is the town from where Casey’s paternal ancestors emigrated from during the Potato Famine.

We met our next Sheela on our visit to Kildare to see St. Brigid's Cathedral; there she adorns a tomb of the bishop Walter Wellesley in Kildare Cathedral. The Sheela, as Goode describes in her book, "grasps both feet to

affect her display of flight as the bishop makes his last journey" (59). Outside in the graveyard of the cathedral are the remains of the famous fire temple of Brigid, whose flames were guarded by priestesses and later by nuns.

Sharing with you our quest for the Sheela and her splendid images, I am reminded of the words that conclude Goode's book: "possible interpretations come and go, rise and fall. Whatever contradictory meanings we may project onto her, the image endures: powerful, mysterious, eternal" (317). For me, the Sheelas we met on our Goddess pilgrim-





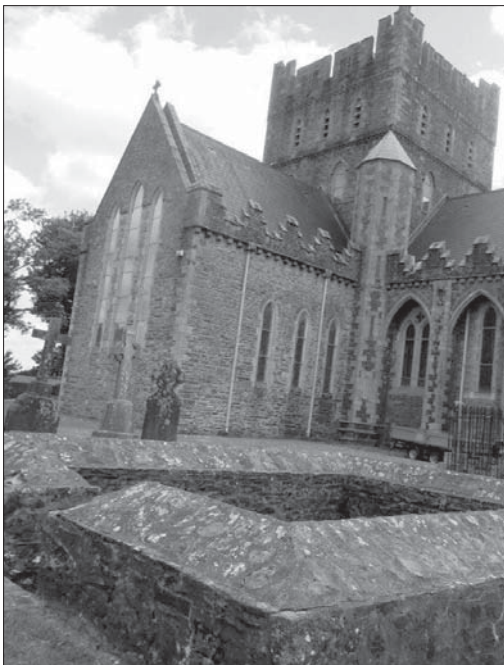


age throughout Ireland exemplify and embody the archetypal mother, and in connection with Her, I connected with my own ancestral motherline to reclaim the power of the feminine.

### Casey's Reflections

Domestic and farm animals play a prominent role in much of Irish legend and mythology, and often they stand in as representations of the Goddess herself.

From the epic of the *Táin* (also known as the *Cattle Raid of Cooley*) and Queen Meave's desire to possess the giant bull, to Brigid's description as a guardian of domestic animals, and similarly Baerra's intention to create stone enclosures at Carrowmore to provide safe shelter for her animals, to Boinn (Boann/Boand) the cow Goddess of the river Boyne, and Macha the horse Goddess who could run faster than even the king's fastest horses, and to the shapeshifting Morrigan transforming herself into a raven, black eel, wolf, and red cow, it is clear that animals are integral to Irish mythology and culture. While journeying to Blacklion, County Cavan in search of Brigid's cursing stones, my mother and I were to witness the sacred connection between the Goddess and domestic animals firsthand, and to discover how much power these animals actually wield.



Brigid's cursing stones rest on the edge of a pasture on the southern shore of Lake Lough Macnean adjacent to a small cemetery and the ruins of a Killinaugh church, and they are comprised of a large rock containing "ballauns" (hollow impressions carved into the rock) containing several smaller stones. As legend has it, the stones are meant to be turned in one direction to deliver a curse and in the opposite direction to deliver a blessing or cure. In a 1998 interview, a resident of the area, Harold Johnston explains, "If you wanted to put a curse on someone, you turned the stones anti-clockwise in the morning." However, if the curse in question was an unjust one, it "would rebound on yourself before night" (qtd. in Killinagh).

Upon our arrival to see the stones, my mother and I, along with our tour guide Bee, crossed the cemetery stopping to admire the old grave stones and their intricate and unique designs featuring various animals and intersecting snakes.

As we approached the entrance to the pasture, we were met with displeased and disapproving faces. A small herd of cows had heard our footsteps in the cemetery and brazenly crossed the pasture toward the gate.

At first confused and taken aback, we soon learned the reason behind their bold behaviour; nestled behind one of the cows stood three calves.

Bee informed us that because the cows stood between us and the stones, it would be too dangerous to cross the pasture, as the cows were likely to attack in defense of their young. These mama cows meant business, and they were not about to let us anywhere near their babes. We respected their space and kept a safe distance. We were able to see the stones and snap a few pictures through the close-up lens of our camera.

Although we were unable to actually get close enough to the stones to touch them, the sentiment behind this experience in many ways meant so much more than that. The cows held the power to either permit or deny entrance, and because of their maternal, Goddess-like instinct, we were denied access by the chosen gatekeepers of Brigid's sacred stones. A both humorous and beautiful experience, it certainly felt in the spirit of our mother-daughter voyage in search of the Goddess.





A day later, we journeyed to Sligo with our tour guide Martin to see the megalithic site of Carrowmore. Legend has it that the Goddess Bearra gathered a collection of stones with the intention of building enclosures to keep her animals safe. However, after gathering the stones in her apron and flying across the area of Carrowmore, she accidentally dropped a number of stones, and the fallen stones created the ancient cairns and rock formations there. It was truly a privilege to see, touch, and even sit upon these formations, which have endured since approximately 3700 BCE.



We were also shown many holy wells. Surrounded by the beautiful and luscious green landscape and grazing cows and sheep, the tranquil energy of these wells created a perfect opportunity to relax in the peacefulness of our surroundings and to sip the sacred and powerful waters of the well.



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We visited St. Hughs Well in Leitrim, where the water ran red with iron, Tobernalt in Sligo, whose waters are said to cure madness, and the sacred wells of St. Brigid in both Faughart and Kildare. Then, with our tour guide Delores, we travelled to Killeavy in Armagh, and visited the ruins of the all-female convent and grave site of St. Monnina—a contemporary and friend of St. Brigid.

We then made the six-hundred-metre climb to the slopes of Slieve Gullion



to sip the waters of her holy well. A winding path covered in yellow gorse and white mayflower, with wire fences littered in sheep's wool, guided our way until we came upon an abandoned and a dilapidated cottage nearly completely covered in overgrown brush.

A short distance later, we were at the well. Surrounded by rolling pastures of grazing cows and trees decorated in scraps of fabric left as offerings, there stood a white structure topped with a large white cross and holding a statue of St. Monnina. Below the structure was her sacred well.



But St. Monnina was not alone at her well that day. An elderly woman, whom we learned was named Christine, stood by the structure, broom and bucket in hand. Christine informed us that every so often she would make the climb up Slieve Gullion, armed with various cleaning supplies, to visit and maintain the well. While talking with her, we learned that the ramshackle cottage we had passed on our journey upward had been the



place of her birth. A rather spirited and forthright woman, she also let us know how the scraps of fabric left as offerings on the nearby trees irritated her as she found them unsightly.



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She agreed to take a few pictures of us at the well with our digital camera, although she had a tough time figuring out how it worked and didn't hesitate to tell us so.



We expressed how impressed we were at her devotion to maintaining the well despite the long, steep journey there, to which she nonchalantly replied that somebody had to do it, and it might as well be her. I couldn't help but feel as the four of us women conversed, shared stories, and laughed that St. Monnina herself was with us, listening intently and laughing along.

For me, one of the highlights of our trip happened in Armagh. The name Armagh comes from the Gaelic "*Ard Macha*" which translates to "Macha's Height." I had first heard of the Goddess Macha in Mary Condren's *The Serpent and the Goddess*. My mother and I knew we needed to travel to Armagh's capital Emain Macha to visit her sacred mound, nowadays known as Navanfort. The site seems little more than a large hill,

but archaeological excavation has revealed a roundhouse-like structure dating back to 95 BCE, which was deliberately and ritualistically burned down and covered in a mound of earth and turf. It is believed to be one of the royal sites of pre-Christian Ireland and is associated with the Goddess Macha.

Macha is known as a Horse and Sun Goddess. One of the most famous stories surrounding her is known as the "Curse of Macha" which is instrumental in explaining the events of the infamous Irish epic the *Táin* (or the *Cattle Raid of Cooley*).

In short, Macha came upon a lonely farmer named Cruinniuc, who had recently lost his wife. She tended to his fire and slept with him. When he asked her name, Macha would repeat "my name cannot be spoken here" and warned Cruinniuc not to mention her presence in Ulster to anyone. One day, despite warnings from Macha, Cruinniuc decided to attend a festival held by the king of Ulster. During the king's festival, there would be chariot races, which the king's horses

would inevitably win. During the race, Cruinniuc foolishly boasted that his wife could run faster than the king's horses. The king, outraged, demanded that Macha be seized and brought to the festival immediately. He then commanded her to race against his two fastest horses and threatened that if she didn't, he would kill her husband. Macha at this time was heavily pregnant and pleaded with the men of Ulster to not make her race. She cried out to them to show sympathy: "For a mother bore every one of you!" They did not listen to her plea and forced to race. She easily beat the king's horses, but upon finishing the race, she fell to the ground and gave birth to the Emain Macha, the twins of Macha.



In some versions of the story, Macha dies shortly after giving birth to the twins, but before her death, she curses all the men of Ulster: every man of Ulster would become as weak as a woman in childbirth during his time of need. The curse of Macha is significant in that it explains why the male warriors of Ulster were too weak and unable to fight during the Táin Bó Cuailnge (Cattle Raid of Cooley), with the exception of the warrior hero Cúchulainn who was born outside Ulster, and, therefore, was not affected by the curse.

After paying our respects to the Horse Goddess Macha at her sacred mound, we began our walk back to the Fairylands Bed and Breakfast where we were staying. We leisurely strolled past a large pasture only to see a great, dark brown horse galloping toward us.



We stopped as the horse approached the gate. The horse seemed eager to interact with us and was extremely friendly. We learned from a man who was walking his dog that the horse was a female. I felt, in that moment, the overwhelming presence of the Goddess Macha. It was truly a magical experience. Mere minutes after paying our respects to the great Goddess and offering her our devotion, we were spending time with an incarnation of Macha in the form of a gorgeous mare.

## Conclusion

“Feminist motherline,” as Green reminds us, “connects mothers and their daughters to help them to understand how their life stories are linked with previous generations of women in their families and cultures” (18). Disconnected from my family’s history and my foremothers, I could not locate myself in a familial motherline to access or retrieve the ancient lore of women and its feminine wisdom. In our journey to Ireland, I was able to discover the feminine wisdom of my Celtic foremothers to create a feminist motherline for me and my daughter. As I was writing the conference paper in spring 2017, from which this article is developed, a Facebook memory appeared from our trip. As I struggled to write a final sentence or two to conclude the conference paper, I looked again at the 550 photos in that Facebook album hoping that I would find inspiration to find the right words to capture in conclusion the meaning



of our pilgrimage in our ancestral land. Since the words still elude me, I will end by reimagining Alice Walker's words: in search of the Goddess, I created my own motherline, among my Celtic foremothers and, most importantly, with my beloved daughter Casey.



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